

# American

## NEWS & VIEWS

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## **U.S. Official, Syrian President Meet in Bid for Improved Ties**

*By VOA News*

One of the highest-ranking U.S. officials to visit Syria in years held talks with Syria's president February 17, one day after Washington nominated its first ambassador to the country since 2005.

U.S. Under Secretary of State William Burns said he and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad spoke candidly while meeting in Damascus. Burns said they discussed both areas of disagreement and common ground.

On February 16, the White House named long-time U.S. diplomat Robert Ford to serve as ambassador to Syria. Ford, who is fluent in Arabic, now serves as the U.S. deputy ambassador in Iraq.

Burns called the appointment a "clear sign" of America's readiness to improve relations and to pursue a comprehensive peace between Arabs and Israelis.

The United States said in June that it planned to reinstate its ambassador to Syria, as part of the Obama administration's efforts to improve relations with Syria and advance the Middle East peace process.

Ford's nomination will have to be approved by the U.S. Senate.

The United States withdrew its last ambassador to Syria after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Many countries have blamed Syria for the assassination, but Damascus has denied involvement.

The U.S. has long accused Syria of supporting Islamic militant groups Hamas and Hezbollah, both of which the U.S. considers terrorist organizations. Washington also has voiced concern about Syria's human rights record and its role in neighboring Lebanon.

## **Capture of Taliban Leader "A Significant Win," White House Says**

*By Stephen Kaufman  
Staff Writer*

Washington — The Obama administration confirmed reports that the Pakistani government has Afghan Taliban military commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in custody, saying the capture of the movement's number two leader is a big success for U.S. and Pakistani cooperation against violent extremism in the South Asia region.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters February 17 that Pakistan recognizes extremists within its borders pose "an existential threat" to their country.

"They have been working productively and cooperatively for more than a year now in assisting international efforts and cooperating in an effort to rid that area of violent extremists," Gibbs said, adding that the capture of Mullah Baradar is "a significant win."

At the same time, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, and U.S. Ambassador to Kabul Karl Eikenberry told President Obama that Afghan-led operations in Helmand province are going well, Gibbs said.

Operation Moshtarak, a Dari word which means "together," was "highly planned and orchestrated," Gibbs said, and is being conducted in close coordination with local Afghan authorities. Extra caution is being paid to prevent civilian casualties, and Gibbs added that many individuals with the Taliban have decided to leave their former stronghold in the town of Marjah.

"Ambassador Eikenberry and General McChrystal lauded not just the size of this offensive but that for the first time, Afghan national security forces were in the lead," Gibbs said. Troops from the multinational International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are fighting alongside the Afghan forces "at a scale not seen at any point in our involvement in Afghanistan, dating back to the beginning of the war" in 2001, Gibbs said.

According to a February 17 news release by ISAF, the military phase of Operation Moshtarak "remains on track" as of February 16.

"The insurgents are tactically adept, have resilience and are cunning, so continued tactical patience on the part of the combined force is important. Mining is significant in areas, and the combined force must be very deliberate in its movement in order to minimize local Afghan and combined force casualties," the news release stated.

The campaign includes ISAF forces from the United Kingdom, the United States, Denmark and Estonia, who are operating in support of the Afghan security and police forces.

"On the ground, the conduct of Operation Moshtarak is visibly demonstrating that the force has changed the way it operates and that it is working with and for the people of Afghanistan," the news release said.

The goal of Operation Moshtarak is for the combined Afghan and international forces to "support the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in

asserting its authority in central Helmand, thereby demonstrating the Afghan government's commitment to the people living there," according to the news release.

"The operation is being conducted at the request of the Afghan government and the governor of Helmand. The security forces involved are serving side-by-side, representing partnership in strength," the news release said.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner said February 17 that civilian forces are also involved in a support role to help the Afghan government "deliver governance and stability to the area immediately after the security operations."

"They're standing by to deploy immediately after Marjah's cleared," Toner said. "Civilians will form a district support team consisting of two State Department governance advisers, one [U.S. Agency for International Development] expert and a British stabilization adviser."

Their effort is part of a larger strategy to build long-term stability. "If you simply provide security without bringing in the governance and development and assistance, it's to no avail. So we've really got to make that happen very quickly," Toner said.

According to a February 15 U.K. Ministry of Defense news article, traditional meetings, known as shuras, have been taking place between local residents and the Afghan national army as areas have been captured from Taliban control. The article said that after the "clearing phase" of operations is completed, the Afghan government and its international partners are establishing civil authority and amenities such as schools and hospitals to improve local conditions.

In addition, "Cash for Work" projects have been identified to provide local employment opportunities, and recruiting efforts will begin "straight away," the article said.

British Defense Secretary Bob Ainsworth was quoted in the article as saying that now begins "the most important phase of the operation," which he said is "winning over the hearts and minds of the people of Nad 'Ali and Marjah so that they don't tolerate the Taliban in their midst, so that they are not intimidated by them and so the insurgency cannot re-establish itself in the area."

British Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup was quoted in the article as saying, "Time is a very important factor," with the local population needing to see quickly that the Afghan government will be staying and providing them with adequate security, support and services.

## Iranian Americans Focused on Political Situation in Iran

*Survey respondents also cite close ties with friends, relatives in Iran*

By Jeff Baron  
Staff Writer

Washington — Fereidoon has lived in Chicago for years and is a U.S. citizen, but ask him about the issue that's uppermost in his mind and he talks about Iran: the 2009 election that he says was stolen, the restrictions on human rights and the crackdown on dissent.

"Everything I can find on CNN [Cable News Network], I never miss any of it," he said.

Fereidoon's concerns are mirrored in a report on the latest survey of Iranian Americans. It finds that they are focused on what is happening in Iran and maintain close ties with relatives and friends there.

Fereidoon, like other Iranian Americans interviewed, asked that his full name not be used because he does not want to put his relatives in Iran in danger. And like most people who participated in the survey, he is close to people back home: in his case, his mother, who is in her 90s, as well as his brothers and a large extended family. He calls home about two times a month and visits every two years — or did, he said, until last summer, when his brothers advised him to cancel his trip because it would be too dangerous for a U.S. citizen to arrive during unrest that the Iranian government blamed on Western agitators.

He said he worries that he might not see his mother again.

The survey (PDF, 1.1MB) for the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) offers a picture of a community very much in touch with a country 10,000 kilometers to the east but easily reached by e-mail and phone. Half of the Iranian Americans surveyed said their families have been in the United States at least 30 years. But two-thirds said they communicate with family members in Iran at least several times each month, and 6 percent are in touch every day. Ten percent said they don't communicate regularly with family in Iran, and that would include the 7 percent who said they have no family there.

When asked what issues most matter in their lives, most of those surveyed in August 2009 and September 2009 had their eyes on Iran. One-third listed foreign policy issues involving U.S.-Iran relations as their top concern, and an additional 20 percent chose internal affairs of Iran. Issues in their lives and communities that aren't unique to Iranian Americans — such as health care and the economy — were at the top of the list for 22 percent, and 16 percent said domestic issues involving Iranian

Americans — such as civil rights — topped their list. The rest, about 10 percent, said that they weren't sure or that their top concern was something else.

Eighty-five percent said their heritage is very important or somewhat important to them.

And many Iranian Americans do more than call home to stay in touch. Thirty percent said they travel to Iran once every two to three years, and an additional 11 percent said they go every year. About a quarter said they never make the trip.

The link to Iran is strong, but those surveyed are overwhelmingly Americans in a legal sense: PAAIA's first survey, a year earlier, found that 9 percent were born in the United States but 81 percent are U.S. citizens; an additional 15 percent are permanent residents.

"They're almost exclusively secular. Otherwise they wouldn't be living here," said Mahasti Afshar, PAAIA's executive director.

They also are overwhelmingly sympathetic to the protesters in Iran. When asked whether the Iranian presidential election was free and fair, 87 percent said it was not, 7 percent said it was and 6 percent said they weren't sure.

Fereidoon laughed bitterly when he heard that question. He said he has no doubt that the election was stolen.

As for U.S. policy, 72 percent said it should promote human rights and democracy in Iran. One-third said it should promote regime change.

"We Iranian Americans want for Iranians — want for the world — what we have here, which is human rights," Afshar said.

Maryam, a resident of Great Neck, New York, echoed that idea in explaining her deep interest in what happens to Iranians. "They need freedom. They need rights of speech, freedom of chador," she said.

Fereidoon offered some praise for President Obama's approach to Iran, saying Obama has spoken for democracy but not tried to interfere. "He handled it very well," Fereidoon said. "He didn't get involved — because if he got involved, he would be blamed" by the Iranian government.

Those surveyed tended to agree with Fereidoon. Half favored diplomatic negotiations with Iran, compared with 42 percent who said it would be in the best interests of the United States to seek a change in regimes in Tehran. Five percent said they favor U.S. military action against Iran.

The survey was done for PAAIA by the polling firm Zogby International, which called phone numbers at random from a commercially available list of people with Iranian last names. Zogby interviewed 402 Iranian-American adults and said the margin of error for the results is plus or minus 5 percentage points.

This was the second time PAAIA had surveyed the people it tries to represent. The first survey, a year earlier and 10 months before the disputed presidential election, showed the same close ties with Iran but much less attention to its politics. In 2008, U.S.-Iran policy issues and Iranian internal affairs were at the top of the list for about a third of those surveyed, and the biggest area of interest, at 38 percent, involved general issues not unique to Iranian Americans.

### **U.S.-African Trade More Than Doubled in Eight Years**

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.  
Staff Writer

Washington — In the past eight years, U.S. trade with sub-Saharan Africa has more than doubled as Africans improve their lives and livelihoods while exporting an ever-expanding list of goods to the United States, says Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Demetrios Marantis.

"At the same time, American companies and workers have found new opportunities to do business in Africa — providing inputs and expertise to aspiring African entrepreneurs, participating in joint-venture partnerships, and increasing American exports and investments," Marantis said in a February 16 speech at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. Makerere, Uganda's largest and oldest university, was established in 1922 as a technical school and has gradually grown into a full university.

The United States has helped foster Africa's expansive trading capacity through the 2000 African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), Marantis added, noting that U.S. imports and exports from the 38 AGOA-eligible nations totaled \$104.52 billion in 2008, a 28 percent increase from the previous year. Complete trade figures for 2009 are being compiled, but give an indication of another good year, according to the U.S. Commerce Department.

The trade growth is being driven by several key economic sectors, including machinery, automotive vehicles and parts, wheat, non-crude oil products, aircraft, and electrical machinery, which includes telecommunications equipment.

"Trade-capacity-building assistance is a critical element in the effort to help African countries turn trade



opportunities like AGOA into exports," Marantis said. "And the United States has worked hard to ensure that African nations have the resources they need to seize the benefits of trade."

At the 2009 AGOA Forum in Nairobi, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said that "as Africa's largest trading partner, we are committed to trade policies that promote prosperity and stability," and the United States wants to be Africa's partner and not its patron. Africa accounts for 2 percent of global trade; an increase of 1 percentage point would generate substantial additional export revenues annually that would be greater than the annual amount of assistance that Africa receives.

Clinton added that AGOA implemented duty-free trade preferences for more than 6,000 African products.

AGOA, signed into law by then-President Bill Clinton in May 2000, is designed to expand U.S. trade and investment with sub-Saharan Africa, stimulate economic growth, promote trade and investment talks, encourage economic integration and help bring sub-Saharan Africa into the global economy. Currently 38 countries are participating in AGOA.

At the center of AGOA are substantial trade preferences that allow all marketable goods produced in AGOA countries to enter the U.S. market duty-free. The U.S. Congress requires the president to determine annually whether countries are eligible for AGOA benefits by meeting certain criteria, including progress toward the establishment of a market-based economy, rule of law, economic policies to reduce poverty, protection of internationally recognized worker rights and efforts to combat corruption.

Marantis said that in addition to improved trade and investment since the inception of AGOA, the United States has established four regional trade hubs in sub-Saharan Africa with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

"The nearest of these, in Nairobi, Kenya, serves all of East Africa, including Uganda," Marantis said. "At that hub, Ugandans can receive AGOA-related training and technical assistance."

"Trade support provided by the Nairobi hub is estimated this year to have produced well over \$14 million in export sales for East African businesses," he added.

But Marantis also added that despite the progress achieved in the eight years since AGOA was first enacted, Africa benefits too little from global trade. "Because Africa lacks capacity, global capital is still too timid about most countries in Africa, fearing instability and

uncertainty," he said.

Marantis said some progress in trade liberalization has been made by sub-Saharan African nations, but Africa's overall trade policies remain the world's most protectionist.

"Average African tariffs are nearly 20 percent. This is compared to just over 10 percent for the rest of the world, and 5 percent for industrialized countries," Marantis said.

"Many African countries lack manufacturing capacity and face challenges such as high energy and transportation costs. This makes products less competitive in global markets," he said.

To change this situation, Marantis said, African nations must continue to adopt broad economic and trade reforms to enhance their ability to attract foreign capital. "Success in this regard will address supply-side constraints, further integrate the region into the global economy, and pull millions out of poverty," he said.

New challenges are rising as other nations, especially in Asia, are becoming more competitive in the global textile and apparel markets, he added, and with the expansion of bilateral free trade and economic partnership agreements. The situation calls for new trade policies, and Marantis said the United States is committed to that.

#### U.S.-AGOA TRADE

In 2008, U.S. imports from sub-Saharan Africa exceeded \$86.05 billion, which was more than quadruple the amount in 2001. U.S. exports to sub-Saharan Africa more than doubled to \$18.47 billion during this period.

In recent years, more than 98 percent of African exports to the United States entered duty-free.

The Commerce Department annual report also said that the top five African destinations for U.S. products were South Africa, Nigeria, Angola, Benin and Ghana. The leading nations for U.S. imports were Nigeria, Angola, the Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Chad and Gabon.

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